

Jews Look at Egypt Today: A Survey of American Jewish Leaders

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US Jewish Leaders Greet Egypt's Developments with Hope and Trepidation, But They Divide Sharply Along Political Lines

As American Jews prepare for the Passover Seder and the recounting of the Exodus of their ancestors from Egypt, the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner released the results of a new survey of American Jewish leaders demonstrating American Jews are of two minds about recent developments in Egypt. On the one hand, they warmly greet the apparent turn to democracy and human rights. At the same time, they are unsure of the implications for Israel and the Jewish State's long-standing peace treaty with Egypt.

Moreover, American Jews split sharply along political lines. The politically conservative and Republican partisans fear that the developments will undermine Egypt's commitment to maintaining its non-belligerent approach toward Israel and are skeptical about the likelihood of advancing democracy and human rights in Egypt.

To be sure, situated between the two poles of cautious celebration and watchful skepticism is the "modal middle" of American Jewish leadership, characterized by ambiguity, ambivalence, and indecision.

These findings emerge from an online, opt-in survey of Jewish leaders conducted by Professors Steven M. Cohen of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive @ NYU Wagner and Samuel Abrams, who is Assistant Professor on the Faculty of Politics, Sarah Lawrence College. Fielded by Research Success Technologies of Israel under the direction of Dr. Ezra Kopelowitz, the survey was conducted in March, 2011, before the role of the Muslim Brotherhood came into sharper focus. The survey of non-random lists of Jewish leaders elicited responses from 1,859 respondents.

The respondents: About a third (32%) were presidents or lay chairs of Jewish organizations or other lay leaders, 19% were professionals in Jewish life, 17% were clergy (both rabbis and cantors), 9% educators, 7% “thought leaders” (professors, journalists, etc.). They ranged widely in age with 20% under 35, 16% 65 and over, and the rest between 35 and 64, and they were almost evenly divided between men (55%) and women (45%). Denominationally they identified as Orthodox (10%), Conservative (45%), Reform (17%), and Other (28%).

Good for the US? For Israel?

Asked about the likely impact of the developments in Egypt upon the US, a plurality thought they’d be good for the US rather than bad (26% vs. 18%), while the majority (57%) could not agree with either judgment. With respect to Israel, the sample was decidedly less optimistic as by a 32% to 20% margin they thought the developments were bad for Israel, with almost half (48%) not sure or undecided.

Some inkling as to their hesitations about the impact of recent events upon Israel emerges in their reactions to the stability of Egypt’s commitment to peace with Israel. Asked, “In the coming year, do you think Egypt will continue to honor its peace treaty with Israel,” the sample split heavily in the affirmative direction with 72% answering, “Yes” in some fashion (definitely or probably) and just 7% answering, “No.” Yet, just 13% overall answered, “Definitely yes,” suggesting widespread anxiety and hesitation. In fact, a strong plurality saw recent developments as diminishing chances for the Arab country honoring its peace treaty rather

than increasing them (27% vs. 4%). At the same time 24% saw no effect upon commitment to the peace treaty and 27% were not sure.

In a similar fashion, more respondents were in some way “happy” about the developments in Egypt than unhappy (67% vs. 12%), but those who answered, “happy” were split between a small number who were, “very happy” (24%) and nearly twice as many who were only, “somewhat happy” (43%).

Happy Liberals & Worried Conservatives

The researchers developed an overall scale measuring favorable and unfavorable reactions to the developments in Egypt. As it turns out, they found fairly strong correlations among the questions on the impact on the US, the impact on Israel, the impact on Egypt’s commitment to peace, confidence in Egypt honoring the peace treaty, and overall reaction (happy vs. unhappy) to the developments in Egypt.

The composite scale relates very strongly to political orientation. Liberals strongly welcomed the developments in Egypt; while conservatives were deeply skeptical and fearful of the potential adverse impact on Israel and the US. Similar variations apply to party affiliation (Democrat / Independent / Republican) and to denomination. They found the Orthodox least favorable, Reform and non-denominational the most favorably disposed to the recent developments in Egypt, and Conservative leaders located between these two poles.

Illustrative of the variations noted above are those associated with political self-identification. Among those who label themselves “very liberal,” those with favorable attitudes outnumbered the unfavorable by a margin of 72% to 9%. Among the liberals, we find a comparable margin of 41% to 17%. In contrast, among the politically conservative, the unfavorably inclined outnumbered their favorable counterparts by a margin of 60% to 15%. In other words, liberal and conservative Jewish leaders hold diametrically opposed, mirror-image views of the

developments in Egypt. Similarly, the favorable-unfavorable balance among Democrats was 51%-to-20%; among Republicans we see the reverse: 19%-to-62%.

The trends found here among various Jewish leaders reflect the heterogeneity of opinion among Jewish communal leaders and map on to the traditional partisan divides found within the larger Jewish population. While Jews, both here and in the population at large, are overwhelmingly liberal in the aggregate - this is not universal and is not the case for self-identified Orthodox Jews. In fact, close to 50% of Orthodox Jewish leaders identify as ideologically “moderate” and a little over 20% claim to be “conservative with only 30% claiming to be liberal. This looks very different when compared to Conservative and Reform Jews who have few “conservative” and “moderate” identifiers and overwhelmingly state that they are very liberal or liberal (over 70% for Reform leaders and over 60% for Conservative leaders) A similar trend emerges for partisanship where Orthodox identifiers have the largest number of “Independent” and “Republican” identifiers. (Close to 40% when added together compared to under 15% for Reform and Conservative leaders) Nonetheless, when one looks at partisanship across all denominational preferences, a majority of leaders report that they are Democratic identifiers and this continues a many decades old trend where the Jewish community falls in the Democratic circles.

A Note of Caution

“The non-random basis of the survey, based as it is upon an opt-in research design, means that we cannot take the overall percentages too literally as representative of American Jewish leaders,” commented Prof. Cohen. “Even if we could crisply define who is a leader and who isn’t, we have far from a representative sample.”

“That said, we feel total confidence in our finding that with respect to recent developments in Egypt, and the Arab world in general, American Jewish leaders are torn between celebration and trepidation. They celebrate the apparent, early moves toward democracy, but they fear how instability may threaten the security of Israel.”

Prof. Abrams noted, “The feelings we charted vary remarkably by political inclination. The politically conservative, Republicans, and the Orthodox feel very uneasy about these developments. In contrast, the leaders who identify as politically liberal, Democrats, and Reform tend to welcome the developments with greater enthusiasm and fewer concerns. Accordingly, those who call themselves political moderate, independents, and Conservative are situated between the two poles.”

The Berman Jewish Policy Archive @ NYU Wagner (BJPA) is the central electronic address for everyone with an interest in Jewish communal policy. BJPA offers a vast collection of policy-relevant research and analysis on Jewish life to the public, free of charge. Its searchable archive at bjpa.org spans from the early twentieth century into the twenty-first, and is bridging into the future with continually updated print and web-based sources.

a. Opinion on Egyptian situation

From what you've read and heard, do you think that recent developments in Egypt will end up being....for the United States?

	%
Bad for the United States	18
Not Much Effect on the United States	16
Good for the United States	26
Not Sure	41

From what you've read and heard, do you think that recent developments in Egypt will end up being....for Israel?

	%
Bad for Israel	32
Not Much Effect on Israel	6
Good for Israel	20
Not Sure	42

In the coming year, do you think Egypt will continue to honor its peace treaty with Israel?

	%
Definitely No	1
Probably No	6
Not sure	22
Probably Yes	59
Definitely Yes	13

Did the recent developments in Egypt increase the chances that Egypt will continue to honor its peace treaty...

	%
Decreased	27
Not Much Effect	24
Increased	4
Not Sure	27

With regard to the recent developments in Egypt, all things considered, would you say you are...

	%
Very Unhappy	2
Somewhat Unhappy	10
Not Sure	21
Somewhat Happy	43
Very Happy	24

b. Frequencies for pol ID, party, denomination, leadership, age

Political Ideology

	%
Very Liberal	17
Liberal	48
Moderate	29
Conservative	5
Very Conservative	1

Partisan Affiliation

	%
Democrat	80
Independent	6
Republican	14

Religious Denomination

	%
Orthodox	10
Conservative	45
Reform	17
Reconstructionist	5
Renewal	1
Secular Humanist	2
Secular	3
Post-Denominational	9
Non-Denominational	4
Other	3

Jewish Leadership Role

	%
Rabbi	16
Cantor	1
Educator	9
Professional head of Jewish organization or group	8
Professional staff member of a Jewish organization or group	11
Lay Chair or President of a Jewish organization or group	9
Lay Leader, not a chair or president	23
Thought leader (writer, professor, journalist)	7
Other	15

Age

	%
Under 35	20
35- 44	15
45- 54	20
55 -64	30
65 and Over	16

Egyptian Attitude Index By Partisan Affiliation

	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Very un-favorable	3	12	23
Unfavorable	17	26	39
Mixed, not sure	29	30	19
Favorable	34	21	15
Very favorable	17	11	4

Egyptian Attitude Index By Political Ideology

	Very Liberal	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Very Conservative
Very unfavorable	1	3	10	20	42
Unfavorable	8	14	31	40	42
Mixed, not sure	20	32	29	25	8
Favorable	41	26	23	12	8
Very favorable	31	15	8	3	--

Note: very Conservative reports on a sample size of 12 respondents only.

Egyptian Attitude Index By Age

	Under 35	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Very unfavorable	4	6	7	5	8
Unfavorable	15	23	33	18	21
Mixed, not sure	29	24	25	33	26
Favorable	32	31	29	30	34
Very favorable	19	17	16	13	11

Egyptian Attitude Index By Religious Denomination

	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform	Other
Very unfavorable	10	7	5	3
Unfavorable	30	22	18	13
Mixed, not sure	28	30	28	26
Favorable	25	29	35	35
Very favorable	7	14	14	23